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ABSTRACT

The role of the faculty in helping the learning disabled student succeed on campus is discussed. It is suggested that faculty members who reject the learning disabled are at one end of the spectrum, while the faculty members who treat the disability as incidental while providing assistance are at the other end. The rejecting faculty member may perceive the learning disabled student to be lazy, unmotivated, and not intelligent enough to be in college. Such characteristics as the students' limitations in reading and writing and need for repetition to understand assignments may influence faculty members to label these students as unfit for higher education. Other types of faculty attitudes/reactions are as follows: mothering, inexperience in making the correct classroom adjustments, and realism and flexibility in class expectations and accommodations. Two effective faculty interventions currently in use are modeling and contacts with information. In modeling, resource people help faculty to make classroom accommodations, while contacts with information help to raise the consciousness of faculty about the needs of the learning disabled student. Classroom interventions include administering tests orally to students with low reading/writing skills, and modifying class assignments. (SW)

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CAMPUS RESPONSE TO LEARNING DISABLED

Academic Adjustments and Role of Faculty

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The faculty are essential to helping the learning disabled student succeed on campus. Yet, they may be fully unprepared to deal with these students in regard to academic policy or classroom accommodations. Part of this is due to their highly specialized spheres of interests and also their limited exposure to the learning disabled students.

Academic Adjustments

Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act requires that an institution make modifications in its academic requirements, if needed, to ensure that they do not discriminate against handicapped individuals. Modifications may include lengthening of the time for degree requirements or substitution for specific courses. Methods of program operation will need to be adapted to facilitate the education of the handicapped, and examinations should reflect achievement, rather than the handicapping condition.

Although the majority of learning-disabled students can be characterized as having difficulty with reading and writing skills, the degree and scope of these difficulties varies, as do the defects in underlying psychological processes (visual and/or auditory perception, visual-motor, sequencing or integrating abilities). For these reasons, academic adjustments must be made on an individual needs basis

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There may be several situations where waivers and course modification might need to be made. Many learning-disabled students have extreme difficulty learning a second language, and foreign language requirements may have to be modified or dropped. Because these students must take more time to study and complete assignments to compensate for their learning disability, the minimum number of course requirements per semester as well as total length of time to complete degrees may have to be changed. Since many learning-disabled students also require some one-to-one instruction, it might be necessary to provide tutors for content areas as well as basic skills instruction to improve reading, writing, and study skills.

Faculty Role and Attitudes

Walker (1980) points out that faculty members are products of widely differing learning environments and bring to the postsecondary institution attitudes that can be described on a continuum of acceptance. While Walker is primarily emphasizing the continuum of faculty attitudes toward the physically handicapped, many of her ideas are very applicable to attitudes held about the learning disabled. At the one end of the continuum, natural fears have been reinforced by negative encounters, and the "rejector" completely rejects the learning-disabled students, judging them unsuitable for postsecondary education. At the other end, successful contact with the learning disabled has enabled "the wise" one to treat the disability as incidental and give honest help to the learning-disabled student.

Rejector

The attitude of the rejector is easy to define but complex in origin (Walker, 1980). The faculty often reflect society's attitudes toward the learning-disabled. They may perceive the students to be lazy, unmotivated, and

not intelligent enough to be in college. It is very hard for the faculty member who is usually highly verbal and geared to publication as a source of professional recognition to realize that someone may have severe limitations in reading and writing but can still meet college level expectations if given certain accommodations. In addition, the student who may stare intently, make inappropriate comments in class, and need continual repetition to understand the assignment is likely to wear down the patience and understanding of the faculty member who has not been educated to understand and accept these students. When these factors are added to the fact that diagnosis is made very hard by the many forms and varieties of learning disabilities, it is no wonder that many faculty find it easier to label learning-disabled students unfit for higher education than to try to discern their learning needs.

The self-studies of colleges and universities required by Section 504 have revealed that attitudes toward handicapped students are related to early learning. When departments of academic institutions were surveyed for actual practice and program accessibility, the attitudes that emerged showed that many faculty members viewed the learning-disabled students as inappropriate consumers of higher education. This pattern is consistent with the theory and research presented by Wright (1960) twenty years ago. Wright's work indicated that the loss most feared by an individual is that of the function or part of the body that he or she values most highly. Since intelligence and learning ability are valued highly by those who have chosen academia as their life's work, it is not surprising that faculty members should intensify their rejection of learning-disabled students (Walker, 1980). Having achieved success early in their lives, rejectors may have experienced less able classmates as dependent and therefore to be avoided. This early experience that slower students are an inconvenience or even a burden may have transformed mild aversion into resentment (Walker, 1980).

Mothering

Closer to the negative than to the positive end of the continuum, a second type of faculty attitude is identified as mothering. The faculty member may manifest a functional acceptance of the learning disability that overcompensates for the disability, ignoring the fact that these students have special problems. The learning-disabled student learns very early how to manipulate this type of faculty member. Such faculty members do everything for the student lower academic standards for the student, and do not attempt to make reasonable accommodation to the student's learning modality. Students may be able to successfully pass courses taught by such instructors but have learned very little and are set up for future academic difficulties, because now they suffer from poor preparation as well as from having specific learning difficulties.

Novices

Probably most faculty fall more on the positive end of the continuum in the group which Walker (1980) refers to as the "novices." They are new to the concepts of working with the learning disabled. Their responses are highly tentative, and indicate an openness to the exploration of possibilities, but they need a lot of help in knowing how to modify the curriculum. The novices may be naive and skeptical, because they just do not know how to make the correct adjustments in the classroom.

Wise Ones

At the extreme positive end of the continuum are the "wise ones" who have been the innovators and successful implementers of programs for the learning disabled. They will involve themselves with the learning-disabled student and will share with other academic departments their successful methods of instruction to the learning disabled. They are realistic and flexible in

their class expectations, give honest feedback to the students and make necessary accommodations in a matter-of-fact manner.

Disabled students, in general, experience more anxiety in the classroom environment than their nondisabled counterparts. Describing the emotional reactions of individuals to various environments, Mehrabian (1976) states that anxiety is greatest in environments of uncertainty. Imagine the ambiguity of the classroom situation for the disabled student who does not know if the faculty member will reject him or her outright, will be the mothering type whose over-helpfulness limits student learning, a novice who is inept at curriculum modification, or a wise one who can truly help the student to learn in this classroom environment. The combination of lack of meaningful contact with learning-disabled students, aversion to the concept of remedial as appropriate to higher education, a faculty self-concept that demands high academic performance from students, and students who are already highly anxious constitutes a frame of reference that must be kept in mind if faculty members are to be understood.

Faculty Interventions

Walker (1980) points out that modeling and contacts with information are probably the two most important and effective faculty interventions currently in use. In modeling, the successful implementers can be recruited as resource people for faculty members who are just learning how to make classroom accommodations. It is helpful if the successful implementer can be in the same or related discipline as the novice professors, since a lot of curriculum modifications are content-focused. Wide visibility should be given to these role model professors through newspaper articles, TV interviews, and letters of application from appropriate administrators for their successful efforts in

working with the learning disabled in the classroom. Faculty members will not continue to act as models or support for their novice colleagues unless reinforcement is built into the intervention program.

Contact with information is particularly valuable in working with the novice or rejecting types of professors. A review of the educational programs designed to change attitudes toward disabled persons indicated that neither contact with disabled persons nor information about disabilities served to change these attitudes appreciably but that contact reinforced by information did have a favorable impact. While this literature review was aimed at the physically and mentally disabled, many of the principles can be applied to the learning disabled. It has been suggested that one of the best contacts is when students serve as work-study personnel within academic departments that emphasize their abilities. Since many learning disabilities are invisible until the student needs to demonstrate tremendous skill in reading or writing, faculty would be able to see the student function capably before encountering problems likely to occur in the classroom, and such encounters would help reduce faculty biases. It may be necessary to screen or train the learning-disabled work-study student to counteract possible negative attitudes on the part of some rejecting faculty.

Of course, workshops, lecture presentations, and panels must also be used to raise the consciousness of the faculty about the needs of the learning disabled. Small group consciousness-raising sessions should focus upon identifying reasons for attitudes and expectations and becoming aware of behaviors that are harmful to the learning-disabled student. Small group interactions, sociodrama, and role playing can be used to provide meaningful contact with the learning disabled along with necessary information about specific disabilities (Walker, 1980).

Competent and respected members of their own profession who happen to have a learning disability could be invited to speak on their area of expertise. The focus should be on the individual's competency rather than on the learning disability, but such a discovery can be a real object lesson to the naive or rejection faculty. Rockefeller, Einstein

All faculty members who are scheduled to come in contact with the learning-disabled student should be provided as much information as possible about the student. Faculty members need to know the student's prior learning experience, the student's vocational aspirations, and the student's need for special assistance and/or equipment. Suggestions in regard to specific curricular accommodations will be critical to a successful interaction between the faculty and the learning-disabled student in his or her class.

Since many students do not discover that they have a learning disability until they begin to confront the greater academic expectations of college, faculty members need to know what to look for in regard to specific behavior which might indicate learning disabilities. Faculty need to know where to refer and receive feedback as to the disposition of the student's problem. In some instances, faculty will need to be taught referral skills, since these skills may not be natural to them.

Information can flow two ways. It can provide reinforcement for the faculty member who is given advanced information and who may consequently be viewed as an important source of information about the student's academic progress. This faculty member can give an accurate assessment and can serve as a valuable asset in planning the learning-disabled student's curriculum.

Classroom Interventions

Specific classroom interventions and diagnostic tools have been discussed in other chapters, but there are some general considerations to be met in most instances. The federal reulations require alternative testing to measure

achievement accurately. Instructors may have to give tests orally to those students whose reading and writing skills are low. Class assignments may also have to be tailored in much the same way. Time may be needed for the faculty to adjust to giving oral exams and for the student who may not be used to taking exams in this manner.

The most common defects affect the ability to read textbook and research materials, write compositions (spelling, handwriting, and organizational skills) and integrate lecture information through taking notes. Traditionally, higher education has consisted of textbook-centered lecture courses. It has been suggested that college instructors learn about learning disabilities and expand their teaching styles. Some learning-disabled students learn better in a discussion format. For others, an oral presentation may better reflect their knowledge of a topic than would a term paper. A rigid insistence on reading and writing as the only way to learn does not show sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of learning-disabled students. The development of all language skills should be stressed, and arrangements should be made for the learning-disabled student to work in his or her own way.

For the learning disabled, visual skills deficits in reading might be treated in the same way as blind handicaps, by providing a bookless curriculum geared to the needs of individuals who can learn advanced material but cannot read. Those whose writing deficits hinder their ability to take notes should be allowed to bring recorders to class. The use of note takers can also be considered.

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